

A Week is a Long Time in Politics

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Tuesday evening included the ITV questions to Jeremy Hunt and to Boris Johnson. I decided not to offer guidance to anyone who asked my advice about for whom to vote. I have said that if I thought Boris Johnson were the obvious answer, I should have said so. Each viewer can decide who won the debate; each can also decide who could be the better prime minister.

During each of the parliaments in which I have served, I have tried to work constructively with successive prime ministers, no matter which their party. Harold Wilson was the first to offer a kind word after I succeeded his parliamentary private secretary Bill Hamling MP, a fine upright former signaller in the Royal Marines during WWII. There is a stained-glass window of William Blake to Bill's memory in St Mary's church, Battersea.

The local link is in Rustington, the home of Sir Charles Hubert Parry, second head of the Royal College of Music. Charles Villiers Stanford thought him the best English composer since Purcell. Frederick Delius was not convinced. Parry inspired Edward Elgar and taught Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst. He is best known for setting in 1916 William Blake's poem *And did those feet in ancient time with the music we all now sing*. It was inspired by the thought of a brief Heaven in England if Jesus when young could have come with Joseph of Arimathea to Glastonbury.

The mill may have been a steam powered flour mill. Blake was probably in Sussex's Felpham, thinking of the local countryside, seven miles from Rustington. The Poet Laureate Robert Bridges included Blake's poem in his 1916 patriotic anthology *The Spirit of Man*. The war was not going well; it seemed destined to continue, on and on.

Bridges asks Sir Hubert Parry for music that could encourage an audience to join in singing. Conferences of Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservatives have each sung this patriotic song.

Back to the day: after a raft of emails, Tuesday's parliamentary duty began when I chaired the Economic and Social Research Council meeting to consider the aims of the Institute of Fiscal Studies consideration of inequality. The LSE professor Lucinda Platt and the ever-balanced Paul Johnson spoke. Note: it is possible for everyone to become better off while the Gini inequality index worsens; similarly, everyone can become worse off while the inequality index improves.

Mid-morning, I talked with a mixed group of visitors about the purposes and the practices of politics. I spoke of the miracle that marking voting papers in polling stations across the country can be mightier than a few younger people running around the streets threatening others with submachine guns. When the group went to the public gallery, I joined colleagues for Justice questions. The topic that interested me was whether a couple determined to divorce should be forced into counselling.

I missed lunch to draft notes for the Home Affairs Select Committee's hearing on what had and what had not changed in the twenty years since Sir William Macpherson produced his vital inquiry report on the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. The events, some raw and recent, described by former police sergeant Gurpal Viridi in his book *Behind the Blue Line* show that whatever the welcome progress, there is more to do.

We later debated and voted on issues linked to the non-sitting Northern Ireland Assembly, together with issues we have sensibly settled in England and in the Republic of Ireland. It has been one of those days when I cannot convince myself that every one of my votes was right.

On Wednesday morning, the office was suspended so we could attend the funeral of the senior member of our team. Maureen loved parliament; she worked on until the end of her earthly life, always with a smile and with good cheer. We miss her.